

One New Book for the Preacher

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A WHOLE NEW LIFE: AN ILLNESS AND A HEALING by Reynolds Price.
Atheneum Macmillan Publishing Company: New York, 1994.

Any preacher and pastor who has walked with someone through the valley of cancer will want to read Reynolds Price's compelling autobiographical account of his own life-threatening journey. At the age of fifty-one this successful writer of novels, poetry, and plays, the James B. Duke Professor of English at Duke University, became paralyzed from the chest down by spinal cancer. As he endured four years of surgery, radiation, medication, rehabilitation, and excruciating pain, he sought the companionship of a book describing a similar suffering. Except for "short stretches of the Bible" he found no such companion, and so the writing of his own story found its purpose in providing such companionship for others.

Reynolds Price describes himself as an unchurchly Christian, but the book is about a spiritual journey as much as it is about his cancer and healing. His affirmations of faith, commentary about prayer, theological certainties, and questions are loosely threaded throughout the narrative. While they do not fit into a traditional confessional heritage of the church, they may be closer to the experiences of the person in the pew. The author believes that God did not cause his suffering, nor will God alone pull him out of it. God is one who appears to come and go, but even brief glimpses of a divine presence provide some source of strength for Price who believes he must find his way to recovery basically all by himself. He admits he never asks the question, "Why me?" knowing full well the only response is, "Why not?"

His experience of God's presence comes in the rare form of a vision where he is transported to the Sea of Galilee and has a personal encounter with Christ, as well as in the ordinary elements and familiar taste of communion. Neither of these experiences is met with pious surrender but rather with the keen observation of a writer struggling to understand his own mortality.

In the final chapter, Price looks back upon his illness and healing through the eyes of someone who has in life experienced a kind of resurrection. He mentions how physicians describe an illness as "catastrophic," notes that the Greek translation of the word *catastrophe* means an *overturning*, an *upending*, then applies that meaning to his new life. He reflects: "So *disaster* then, yes, for me for a while - great chunks of four years. *Catastrophe* surely, a literally upended life with all parts strewn and some of the most urgent parts lost for good, within and without. But if I were called on to value honestly my present life beside my past - the years from 1933 till '84 against the years after - I'd have to say that, despite an enjoyable fifty-year start, these recent years since full catastrophe have gone still better. They've brought more in and sent more out - more love and care, more knowledge and patience, more work in less time."

Indeed, in his twenty-two years of writing before his cancer, Price had published twelve books; in the few years since, he has completed fourteen. While his illness ended with healing, a more productive career, the wisdom and depth gained from

suffering, and “a whole new life,” his reflection is not that of a self-indulgent hero who survived. The account of his illness and healing is a modern day psalm of lament and praise. He descends into the depths of the valley of death and comes through profoundly humbled and grateful.

This book is fertile ground for the preacher. On one level it is the story of one person’s illness and healing; on another it is the story of Lazarus who died and was raised. It is a person’s way of coming to understand that the old life is gone and will never be recovered, yet by some mysterious grace a new life has come in its place. This autobiographical sketch contains an eloquent essay on the complex problem of medical ethics, and is a case study for pastoral care. The way this writer of fiction introduces himself as a human being when the plot of his life takes a tragic turn is valuable for its sheer honesty and authenticity.

Reynolds Price still has physical challenges that this fiercely independent person never imagined would be his, but he continues his writing and is teaching again one semester a year at Duke. His normal teaching schedule includes a course in writing and a course on Milton. Recently, however, he has taught a class on the Gospels as literature as well. Anyone who journeys with him through his memoir will not be surprised.